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THE BATTLE OF NORTH POINT

Throughout the day and night of September 13th, 1814, a British fleet bombarded the coast defences of Baltimore, the most important of which was Fort McHenry. On the morning of September 14th, all hope of subduing the shore batteries was abandoned, and the defeated fleet dropped down the river.

Thanks to "The Star-Spangled Banner," no engagement in which the army took part during that dismal war is better remembered, and everyone knows that it was Major Armistead's gallant defence of Fort McHenry that saved Baltimore from the fate which Washington had suffered three weeks before. The silencing of the forts would, of course, have placed the city in the hands of the British; but it must be remembered that Forts McHenry and Covington, the Lazaretto Battery, and the rest, were *coast defences*, intended only to repulse an attacking fleet,—as, in fact, they did,—but no more able to protect the city from a land attack than are the guns and mortars of Sandy Hook to prevent the entrance of an army into New York. Major Armistead and his artillery did their work well, but the repulse of the navy before the forts in no way prevented the taking of the city by an advance overland, if made with sufficient force. It was in just this way that Washington had been taken, for the fleet made no attempt to ascend the Potomac, and Fort Washington could have had no share in the fighting. Then, as now, protection on the landward side was the task of the mobile army.

As a matter of fact, the movement against Baltimore was made by land as well as by sea, and on the day before the bombardment of Fort McHenry, there was fought, some seven or eight miles east of the town, the little action known locally as the Battle of North Point. As at Bladensburg, General Ross's splendid little army drove the American militia from their position; but, most unlike Bladensburg, the militia made a respectable fight first.

Let us trace this half-forgotten little campaign from its beginning. After their victory at Bladensburg and their incendiary exploits at Washington, General Ross and his army re-

turned on board the fleet, then lying in the Patuxent River. It was planned to direct the next attack against Baltimore, but for nearly two weeks no movement was made in that direction. On the contrary, a demonstration was made up the Potomac with a view to drawing troops away from the real point of attack. Finally, on September 9th the fleet left the Potomac, and set sail up the bay.

With the British army was a son of the Scotch Bishop of Brechin, George Robert Gleig by name, who had left Oxford at the age of sixteen to serve as a volunteer in the Peninsular War, and now accompanied the troops to America. Many years later he became chaplain-general of the forces. Gleig published, soon after the war, a volume of reminiscences of the campaigns of Washington, Baltimore, and New Orleans, in all of which he took part. It is a readable book, and full of interest, all the more so that it makes no pretence to being a history, but only a narrative of personal experiences and observations. The author, of course, views matters from the standpoint of a British partisan, but not a rabid one, and where his statements need correction it is more often due to lack of full information than to prejudice.

In moving up the bay, the ships kept close to the western shore, in full view of land, and Gleig gives us a vivid description of the panic that accompanied the progress of the fleet, as well it might.

Certain it is that the utmost consternation prevailed in every town or village opposite to which we made our appearance. In passing Annapolis, a considerable town built upon the bay, and possessing a tolerable harbour, we stood in so close as to discern the inhabitants flying from their houses; carts and wagons loaded with furniture, hurrying along the road, and horsemen galloping along the shore, as if watching the fearful moment when the boats should be hoisted out, and the troops quit the vessels. Wherever a light-house or signal station was erected, alarm-guns were fired, and beacons lighted. In a word, all the horrors of doubt and apprehension seemed to oppress the inhabitants of this devoted district.

On Sunday, September 11th, the fleet, some fifty sail, reached the entrance to the estuary of the Patapsco, and cast anchor off North Point.

Ten or twelve miles above North Point, where, at tidewater, the Patapsco broadens from an insignificant creek to a bay a mile wide, is the city of Baltimore, at that time (1814) a place of fifty thousand inhabitants. It had been founded in 1729 as an outlet for the trade of the Maryland and Pennsylvania settlements about the Susquehanna and the head of Chesapeake Bay. The country around had then been settled seventy years. As to the North Point peninsula, with which we are particular concerned, it was purchased in 1664 from the original grantees, by Captain Thomas Todd of Virginia, in whose family a large part still remains. The Todd house stands a mile and a half from the Point on the site of a former house which was burned by the British during this campaign. The Point itself is now occupied by Fort Howard, garrisoned by four companies of coast artillery.

Below Baltimore the Patapsco gradually broadens out until it reaches a width of three miles where it enters the bay. Dredging has given it a channel deep enough for large vessels, but in 1814 it could be entered only by comparatively small craft; the ships of the line were unable to go up for the attack on Fort McHenry, and even the frigates had to be lightened. A little to the north, the still shallower Back River enters the bay; the peninsula between the two estuaries, called the Patapsco River Neck, is in most places not more than two miles in width, and in some, much narrower. Numerous inlets, locally called creeks, are navigable for light-draft boats, and from 1683 on, the trade of this district had largely been carried on by means of small craft which plied up and down the creeks between the farms and the ocean-going vessels, which did not go up to Baltimore, but lay off North Point.

Here, then, the British fleet was anchored on September 11th. The plan of operations contemplated an advance up the Patapsco River Neck by a strong landing party, while such of the ships as could ascend the river were to force their way past the fortifications and so turn the flank of the American position. With

this naval attack, which resulted in the failure before Fort Mc-Henry, we have nothing to do.

The force available for land operations consisted of a strong body of sailors and marines drawn from the men-of-war, and four regiments from Wellington's army, released from service in the Peninsula by the collapse of Napoleon's empire. These regiments—the 4th, 21st, 44th, and 85th—now form one or more battalions of the Lancaster Regiment, the Scots Fusiliers, the Essex Regiment, and the Shropshire Light Infantry, respectively. They were under the command of Major-General Robert Ross,—“Ross of Bladensburg.”

The landing was begun at three o'clock in the morning of Monday, September 12th. The shallowness of the water kept the larger vessels two miles from shore, but as opposition to the landing was feared, several brigs ran in as close as possible, and were anchored fore and aft, with their broadsides bearing on the landing-place. As a further precaution, carronades were placed in the bows of the first boats that approached the shore. No enemy appeared, however, and by seven o'clock the entire force had been landed and was ready to take the road.

From North Point to Baltimore overland is only about fifteen miles, and it was intended to cover this distance in one day's march and to enter the city in the afternoon. Full packs were not carried, each man taking only his blanket, an extra shirt, and a pair of shoes. The weight thus saved was made up by the issue of extra ammunition; eighty pounds were carried on the person, or twenty above the normal allowance.

The column was headed by the light brigade, consisting of the 85th Foot, the light companies of the other regiments, and a small body of marines. The artillery—six field-pieces and two howitzers—followed. Then came the second brigade (4th and 44th regiments), the sailors, and the third brigade (21st regiment and marines). The entire expedition numbered about five thousand men.

The advance guard, consisting of several companies from the light brigade, was formed exactly as would be done at the present time, except that the short range of the weapons of those days allowed much smaller road distances than would be

possible now; the head of the main body seems to have been only about four hundred yards in rear of the point,—the small patrol that precedes the advance party. On each side of the advance guard was a line of men deployed in extended order, sweeping a front of nearly half a mile. These skirmishers, with detachments sent out by the main body, effectually protected the flanks of the column, which we may suppose to have stretched over about two miles of road.

No signs of the enemy were seen until the command had advanced some four miles. Here the road runs for a short distance close to the bank of Back River, while the head of Humphrey Creek, an arm of the Patapsco, is only half a mile away. It was an excellent place for the defence to make a stand, and a line of trenches, with a ditch in front, and an emplacement for a battery in the centre, had been commenced here, running clear across the peninsula. Time had been lacking to finish it, however, and the incomplete line was unoccupied. Here General Ross halted and sent out patrols to reconnoiter. No body of American troops was found, but three cavalry scouts, Baltimore volunteers, were captured. These stated the American force as twenty thousand, a wild exaggeration which did not deceive the British commander. After an hour's rest the column resumed the march.

Now let us see what was being done on the American side. It must be remembered that Chesapeake Bay had now been under blockade for a year and a half, so that Baltimore had had ample time to prepare for attack. The whole able-bodied population had long been enrolled in the militia, and had had more or less training. Some companies were uniformed and equipped; in others the men wore civilian clothes and were distinguished as soldiers only by the muskets they carried. There was a small force of regular troops in the city, and also a body of sailors from the navy; these, however, manned the forts and batteries on the river, so that the defence on the land side was left to the militia. The garrison was under the command of Senator Samuel Smith of Maryland, a veteran of the Revolution, and now a major-general of militia. In all there may have been fourteen or fifteen thousand troops of one sort or

another in the city, of which about ten thousand were available for the land defence.

A strong line of trenches had been constructed east of the city, starting on the river a mile or more above a line of hulks which blocked the channel, running north past the present site of the Johns Hopkins Hospital, and then curving west to Broadway. Behind good earthworks the rawest of troops may be expected to make a creditable fight,—witness Bunker Hill and New Orleans;—from a frontal attack there was little to fear.

General Smith, however, was inclined to make if possible something more than a passive resistance. On the news of the appearance of the British fleet in the Patapsco, he sent forward one brigade, 3,200 strong, to get in touch with the enemy and hinder his advance. This brigade was composed of the 5th, 27th, 39th, and 51st regiments, and small bodies of riflemen, cavalry, and artillery. In these regiments were three companies of volunteers from Pennsylvania towns, and one from Hagerstown, Maryland; the rest were Baltimore troops. Six four-pounders accompanied the brigade, which was commanded by General Stricker, another veteran of the Revolution. A battery of twelve-inch rifles at Fort Howard now bears his name.

At eight o'clock on the evening of the eleventh, General Stricker went into camp seven miles from Baltimore, at the head of a large inlet of the Patapsco called Bear Creak. Two roads leading out from Baltimore met at this place and from here to North Point there was but one road, which must be followed by the enemy's column. The cavalry was pushed forward about three miles, to the Gorsuch farm, near the unfinished line of works before mentioned. Three troopers, as we have seen, were picked up by the British patrols next morning. A mile in rear of the cavalry, on the edge of a thick wood, were placed the riflemen. General Stricker intended them to annoy the flank of the British as they advanced, but they took alarm next morning at a rumor that troops were landing behind them on Back River, and hurried back to the main body without waiting for the enemy to come in sight.

The British advance guard, moving forward after the halt at the Gorsuch farm, had proceeded only a mile when they became

engaged with a reconnoitering party sent out by General Stricker,—three or four hundred men, with one four-pounder. General Ross hurried forward to view the situation for himself, and had hardly reached the firing-line when he was struck and mortally wounded. The place where he fell is marked by a small monument erected in 1816 by a company of Baltimore infantry which took part in this preliminary skirmish.

On the fall of General Ross, the command devolved upon Colonel Brook of the 44th, who hastened forward at once from his place with the second brigade. Under his direction the advance was cautiously continued until he sighted the American position. General Stricker's brigade was astride the road, his right, the 5th regiment, resting on Bear Creek. His guns were planted alongside the road, and the 27th regiment extended the line to the left. The 39th and the 51st were held three hundred yards in rear. The 6th, with a small part of the 5th, constituted a general reserve a mile up the road. The position was unfortified, but was generally wooded, and some fences of the Bouldin farm served as obstacles. The farmhouse and outbuildings stood in front of the center of the line, but were not occupied by troops.

Upon the appearance of the British, Stricker's artillery opened a heavy fire. The British guns replied, not only with shrapnel, but also with rockets, which quickly set fire to a haystack. The flames spread to the farmhouse and outbuildings, and they were soon all ablaze.

Holding the 21st regiment in column on the road, Brook sent the 4th to turn the left of the American line, while the light brigade was deployed in extended order for an attack in front, with the 44th, the sailors, and the marines, in support. Stricker at once extended his line by placing the 39th alongside the 27th, and putting the 51st on high ground at the left, almost at right angles to the general front; here they could command all practicable ground as far as Back River. This movement had to be executed under the fire of the British artillery, and was accordingly done in such a confused manner that Colonel Brook hesitated in sheer perplexity as to what all this wild hurrying to and fro might mean.

As soon as his toops were in position, Brook ordered the attack, which was quickly pushed home under a heavy fire from three of the American regiments. The 51st, however, broke after firing a few wild shots. The panic spread to the nearest companies of the 39th, and some eight hundred of the Americans took to their heels up the road, leaving the left flank in the air. Obviously the only thing for Stricker to do was to fall back in as good order as possible; indeed, nothing more than a delaying action was contemplated in the first place. Accordingly, orders were given to withdraw the guns, the infantry to follow.

To execute such a movement in an orderly manner would have been difficult with the best of troops; with unseasoned men it was impossible. Before the withdrawal could be fairly begun, the rapid advance of the light brigade had brought it near enough for the charge. The Americans had a wholesome respect for that unfamiliar weapon, the bayonet, and they promptly abandoned their position, leaving two field pieces to fall into the hands of the enemy. The retreat was so sudden that a number of riflemen who had posted themselves in trees, were unable to get down and escape. To these no quarter was given, the British soldiers regarding their conduct as "unfair."

After all, the American retreat was less disastrous than might have been expected. No serious pursuit was made, for the 4th regiment was hampered by a marsh and could not get on the road without considerable delay. Then, too, Brook believed that a large force was not far in front of him, and was disposed to take no chances. All along, indeed, he was inclined to exaggerate both his obstacles and his successes. He estimated the brigade he had just defeated at 6,000 men, and was confident that its loss had been five or six hundred in killed and wounded. As a matter of fact Stricker had had only about 2,400 men in line, including those that had run away without fighting; his loss had been 24 killed, 139 wounded, and 50 captured,—213 in all. The British loss was about 300.

It was now well on in the afternoon. There was no more hope of entering the city that day, as had been planned, and Brook pitched camp without attempting to advance farther. Hitherto the weather had been fair, but at midnight a heavy rain

began to fall. At dawn the army broke camp. Confident of taking the city before noon, and desirous of getting the job over with as little discomfort as possible, Brook directed that all packs be left behind, under guard, so that the men might push forward unencumbered. The advance was slow. Stricker had not been idle in his retreat, but had felled trees across the road and constructed abatis, so that the march was badly hampered.

However, only five miles had to be covered before the main position of the Americans, previously described, came in view. Clearly this was no place to attack rashly. All day the army waited, two miles from the American works, while Brook studied the situation. Reconnoissance showed that the place was not to be taken by assault. It would be necessary to wait until the navy, which was cannonading furiously all day, should force its way past the shore batteries and get in rear of the American right flank. Night came on, and the soldiers, minus their packs, made themselves as comfortable as they could in the rain, while Brook anxiously sought to get in communication with the fleet. This was at last accomplished, and the navy reported that the passage could not be forced. Nothing remained but to get back on board as soon as possible. At three o'clock in the morning of the fourteenth the retreat was begun, the rain opportunely stopping, and the moon coming out. Little attempt at pursuit was made, and that little was checked at the incomplete fieldwork near the Gorsuch house, under whose shelter the British camped for the night. The next day the troops were reëmbarked.

No further military operations were undertaken on Chesapeake Bay. Not long after, the British troops were withdrawn to Jamaica, where the expedition against New Orleans was being prepared.

Throughout the United States the news of the successful defence of Baltimore was received with the greatest rejoicing, all the more that it came so soon after our disgrace at Washington. Under the circumstances, perhaps, a little exaggeration of the occasion may be pardoned. In the last analysis, of course, the facts are that warships had been unable to reduce coast defences, as they have usually been through the whole course of

history, and that five thousand troops could not successfully assault strong fieldworks held by double their force. This is not meant to disparage the courageous defence of the forts, or the sharp little battle of General Stricker's militia, who, except in the case of one regiment, behaved as well as could be asked of raw troops fighting in the open. With such odds as there were against the British, however, their repulse was, or should have been, a foregone conclusion. It was only the contempt of the American military system which the fight at Bladensburg had very properly inspired in them, that led General Ross and Admiral Cockburn to hope for success in the movement against Baltimore.

But hope they did, and the movement was made. And we for the occasion stood up and fought, and did what we set out to do. It happened rarely enough in that politicians' war. We had one or two chances in those three years to feel honest pride; it is well to make the most of them.

THOMAS MARSHALL SPAULDING.

Fort Howard, Maryland.